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THE USES OF FRUSTRATION

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THERE has come to be an impression, rather widely accepted, it seems, that a normal human life should be nearly always happy, never subject to anxiety, not burdened with frustration, enduringly serene. It is well known, of course, that no one achieves this blissful condition, but it is supposed that, with the right techniques, it can be closely approximated. Happiness is said to be an art, which you can learn just as you can learn to play the piano or to paint. Anxiety is curable by keeping in mind three things, or seven things—or perhaps eleven things, if it is a severe case—which are described for you in a book. Frustration can be got rid of by taking relaxing exercises, or by liberating your libido, or by deciding to possess a mature mind. In this way or in others, and sometimes by entrapping, so to speak, the power of God, you will be a highly fulfilled person, if not dynamic, then at least magnetic, and you can go fussily about in all directions, enjoying extraordinary serenity and low blood pressure, euphorically tranquil and unfrustrated, endowed with the blessedness of peace of mind.

Concerning this, I wish to say two things, the first briefly, the second more at length. First then, just this: it isn't so. The people who promise you these things and who tell you how you can have them are not themselves always happy, in spite of the books that make them prosperous; and they are sometimes anxious and don't know what to do about it; they are often frustrated, too, especially when they don't get the attention to which they think themselves entitled; and their serenity is easily ruffled: if they were listening to what I am saying at this moment it would perturb considerably what they call their peace of mind. If anyone could achieve what these people promise, it would not be necessary to write books about it: after all, writing a book is an unhappy, anxious, frustrating, very untranquil thing. No; all they would need to do is to put themselves on display.

The second thing I want to say—and this is what I shall deal with

more at length—is that even if the promised condition of happiness, serenity, and so forth, were possible of achievement, it would, at the present juncture in human affairs, be very undesirable. Not that I think happiness is a bad thing, or that we ought to hold fast to our anxieties and cherish our frustrations and go about with minds tumultuously perturbed, but simply that our emotional state should be related to the realities.

If anyone says to me that it is very possible that man will vaporize his civilization and blow himself off the planet and that therefore I should feel no anxiety but spend my time in unfrustrated cultivation of tranquility, my temptation will be to ask him whether he knows about voluntary commitment to a mental hospital, and that cases like his are often curable, especially if taken in time.

Now, it is perfectly true that frustration can have intensities that make it pathological. If average reactions are taken as the norm, some people feel more frustrated than they need to do. But no sane, emotionally wholesome person can hope to escape frustration. And since few of us are emotionally altogether wholesome, and most of us are only by courtesy referred to as entirely sane, it is that much the more certain that we shall have to deal with frustration.

The word, *frustration*, comes from the Latin, *frustra*, which means *in vain*. Some things that we want, some purposes that we try to bring about, some ends for which we put forth our energy are, as we say, frustrated. Our wanting and our labor are in vain. This is likely to make us angry. The child who cannot quite reach the desired object may go into a tantrum. The adult may control himself much better. But he feels the same kind of anger. He is the desiring, wanting, striving center of his world, and his world, he feels, should be responsive to him. When anger subsides—which it does not always altogether do—the emotional state becomes one of dejection. The child's attitude is reproachful: he has been denied what should have been his. The adult's attitude is embitterment: he has had time to discover that reproach is often unsuccessful. His position is that it is the nature of life to be frustrating. It does not give *him* what he wants, and so it does not give to *anyone* anything that is much worth having. Or, if it does, then so much the worse that he has been passed by.

Frustration, too, can be a human purpose. As the world now is, competitiveness between human beings leads often to the frustration of one person by another, and frustration in this way becomes a motive. It is the purpose of one person, either individually or through a social entity of which he is a part, to frustrate other persons—or other entities. An upper class is determined to keep a lower class in its place: to frustrate, that is, its aim to rise in the social scale. One race, calling itself superior, exerts itself strenuously to deny to other races what it prizes for itself. "Stay down there," it says, "where you belong. You shall not have what you wish because it conflicts with our wish to deny it to you." Or a society of believers—say a church—having found to its own satisfaction that it knows the final truth, is determined that all other believers—in other churches and in no church—shall accept this final truth, and will go to great lengths to frustrate the desire of these other believers—or unbelievers—to have freedom of belief. It is the same with entities based on economic benefits—or upon the hope of economic benefits. One group, entrenched

in its position, is stubbornly intent upon other groups accepting what it calls its principles, and is strongly hostile to the consideration of other principles and will do what it can to frustrate their introduction. An illustration would be the wish of many groups to control what is printed in school text-books.

It is well recognized, I think, that in political life a man will often be less motivated by the desire to get a position for himself than by the wish to prevent some one else from getting it. And this is true not only in the politics of government, but also in the politics of labor unions, women's clubs and churches. And thus, frustration, very sadly, becomes a man-created factor, operating vigorously in human society. It would be better for us if its influence were less. From the private home to the United Nations, there is far too much of the wish to frustrate, and it reflects, I fear, what people feel driven to because of their own frustrations.

But it is not necessary that they be so driven. Frustration could be better understood. Just as physical pain is a warning of danger to the body, so emotional pain—which is what frustration causes—is a warning of danger to the entire personality. I read, I think, a few weeks ago—although I did not keep the article and my memory of it is very general—that there is a child somewhere whose nervous system is defective, so that he feels no pain if he falls and damages his body tissue or if some part of him is exposed to dangerous heat. It was necessary, if I remember correctly, that he be taught to recognize as well as possible whatever might harm him and to keep it always in mind, since in contact with them he would feel no pain and would therefore have no warning. At best, his condition must be precarious. He has to do intellectually and by conscious effort what, for most of us, is done by a habit-system based upon past experience of pain or by present pain as an immediate stimulus. Pain is very disagreeable but it is also very necessary. There are no ailments of the body that are more to be feared than those that encroach upon us stealthily, giving us no indication of their presence by producing pain.

It is no different in our emotional life. When something that is desired is denied us, we feel pain: the pain of frustration. The important question is, however, what do we then do about it? Unfortunately, we are far more stupid in the way we look after our emotional life than we are in looking after our bodies, and so, instead of allowing the pain to warn us of a condition that we should try to cure, we frequently accept and domesticate it and allow the condition that it indicates to poison us, a condition which, if I were to coin a word, I would call *ego-toxicity*. And I am afraid that we shall have to admit that there are no small number of people thus afflicted, and very few, if any, who can be called immune.

Now, let us take a good look at this condition called frustration. It wears many aspects and is variable in scope. To begin with its largest manifestation, we must always be frustrated in our desire to live indefinitely: except in unusual circumstances, we do not wish to die. But we surely shall die, and we do not know how soon. We are resistant to it. Throughout our lives, in one degree or another—and usually, the degree increases with the years—we feel this shadow hovering over us. Recently, psychologists have paid considerable attention to it, following the philosophers who have studied it for many centuries.

The great religions, of course, and especially Christianity, have tried to deal constructively with this frustration, and the most dramatic method has been the denial that death is real. Christians have been taught to say, and even to sing, that they very much want to die because the life beyond death is a far happier one than the life they are currently living. But irrespective of the merits of this belief, impartial observation seems to show that Christians postpone death very willingly, and in fact, are just as zealous as though they were not Christians in doing everything they can to keep it at a distance. So far, therefore, as dealing with death as a frustration is concerned, the belief must be counted ineffectual.

But it is scarcely different—at least for most people—if death is accepted as a final extinction of the individual—in which case, once death has occurred, nothing is known or felt and so there is nothing to be afraid of in it. In other words, when you are dead, you feel no pain and no frustration and so there is nothing to be dreaded. You should therefore not spoil your life while you are not yet dead by being fearful of it. This is absolutely impeccable logic, and yet, as I say, for most people it does not remove the feeling of frustration.

Nor does it remove the related frustration that they feel about growing old. Many people are apprehensive and often resentful when the wrinkles first appear. And they do not get over it. Yet, rational reflection should convince any of us that we would not really wish to be young forever. What age would we like to become static for us? Twenty? God forbid! It's bad enough to have to be twenty for a whole year! Twenty-five? Well, how much boredom can you stand? To be twenty-five for one thousand years? Worrying all that time whether you've married the right woman? Or worrying as to whether *she's* worrying whether she married the right man? No, I think we have to admit that we are so conditioned that though we may dislike growing old, we are not able to imagine a more favorable alternative. But whether we admit this or not, we *will* grow old, if we live long enough; and whether we live long or not, we will eventually die.

Now, philosophers—Epictetus, for example—tell us that they were able to banish this frustration and that they became adjusted to growing old and to the certainty of death. And I think they were not cheating: what they said about themselves seems true. Other people, not philosophers—or at least not professional ones—make the same adjustment. This I am sure of, because I have known such people. But the fact remains that it is difficult to most. What I would say then, about this frustration, is that we should *accept* it and make it, not an anxiety or a resentment at the nature of reality, but an additional motive for living fully and well. The sting of transiency need not be poisoned. It can help us to cherish that much the more fondly all that is beautiful and good. If you cannot live long, why not live lovingly? For I will tell you this: there is nothing that lessens the fear of death, or diminishes its power as a frustrating factor, as much as living well and fully, with a good conscience, and to the best of your ability. If you believe, as I do, as a matter of faith and with no knowledge whatever, that life is somehow imperishable, just as matter is, it may help you, though I doubt it. Your faith will have to be in life as you know it: in its goodness, in love, in all that has become alive in you out of life's mystery, and it is

in faith that you must live it. The thing to do with this frustration, which is, it seems, an all-embracing one is to say, "So sometime I must die! Then meanwhile I will live well."

And whether you succeed in living well will depend on what you do with other frustrations. What are they? Perhaps you wanted to be rich. If you feel frustrated because riches have eluded you, it is a warning—the feeling of frustration is—that you should look to your emotional health. Why did you want to be rich? To endow a foundation? No, you only endow foundations after you have discovered how little it means to be rich. You wanted possessions and prestige. Do you think they would have made you happy? I remember seeing a movie once about a newspaper owner of great wealth and power, which he mostly used to no good end, and when he was sick and only semi-conscious he was heard to say over and over again the word, "Rosebud." I believed, as all the audience did, I think, that the name was one he had given to some woman he had loved—loved and no doubt had lost—or at least that it had romantic connotations. But as the movie ended, we were shown a child's toy wagon, and on the side of it was painted the name, "Rosebud." When he thought of happiness—this man of wealth and power, able to command so much—his mind went back to his childhood and to the toy that had given him joy such as had never come to him in all his later life through any of his great possessions.

If it is wealth that you have been denied, or power and prestige, your feeling of frustration warns you to take thought. It is better to find joy in less precarious things. It is better to find wisdom than riches. Do you say you have heard that too often; that it is a copy-book maxim; that you don't believe it? All right. Go on hugging your frustration. Only take note that those whom history has counted wisest, those who observed most keenly, those who spoke from what convinced them in experience, gave utterance to this conviction. Even the Old Testament writer of the Book of Ecclesiastes—who was a cynic really and who thought that "all is vanity"—tells us not to put our trust in riches, or in anything but wisdom. It might be best to listen to these people for a bit. Not only individuals but our entire society has more material things today than mankind has had since history began—but our society is not happy. As for power, mankind has found such magnitudes of power as it can end its world with. But it has not made man joyful; nor has it made him wise. Material things have a place in life. They have a place—and an important one—in society. But if it is the dominant place, no good can come of it. If you have wanted wealth and power and have been frustrated, you have probably not been nearly as much frustrated as you would have been if you had got what you wanted. There are two kinds of frustration, you know: that of the man who says, "I did not get what I wanted" and that of the man who says, "I did."

This is true of many of the goals we set for ourselves. And especially of the goal called "getting ahead." In the main, this means getting ahead of other people, and certainly, we would sink back into apathy and be meaningless if we did not have some drive to get ahead. We should go where we can, as far as we can, up the road we wish to travel. But if our achievement seems small compared with our intention, and, if in looking

at other people and the apparent success of their lives, we feel frustrated, again it is time to consider. Getting ahead is a fretful business. The man who has gotten ahead is probably just as much frustrated as the man who feels that he hasn't. As a friend of mine once said to me, "It isn't hard getting to the top; the hard thing is staying there."

Sometimes, that is not the only hard thing. There is also the hard thing of knowing whether it was worth what it took to get where you've got. I was taken out to lunch one day, many years ago, at an exclusive country club. It was not in the Washington area. There *are* no exclusive country clubs in the Washington area. Not really! But this one *was*. As I went in, I saw a lady whom I knew, who, with others, was painting chairs. I thought of how she had goaded her husband to get ahead, and of how she herself had contrived and maneuvered, climbing up the social ladder. All of that, I thought, just to paint chairs at a country club! She was far from happy. That I knew, too. She should have stopped a long way back. She would have known much more contentment if she had done her chair-painting at the not-at-all-exclusive local Unitarian church.

Your feeling of frustration may be trying to tell you something. It may be asking you to reconsider. Have you chosen the right goals? Are you living for the right things? Are you throwing away your life, wasting it in neglect of what it is trying to give you, fretting yourself about what wouldn't please you even if you had it? Can it happen, do you think, that a time will come when you will suddenly remember that there can't be many years left, and you will sit and look blankly at where you are and what you've come to possess; yes, and you will struggle ever harder to keep down the question that you dare not face. But you will have to face it. Have I wasted my life? Have I lived from year to year, some foolish, driven thing, intent upon what at last is meaningless? Have I pushed other people out of my way? Whom I might have known as friends? Who could have brought me wisdom? The goodness of life, has it passed me by? Because I did not think goodness was worth the effort? Life's beauty, its moments of enchantment—was I in too much of a hurry? To have been gentler, kinder, generous when I was harsh, to have known smiles with no malice in them, to have had friends that I did not seek to use: to have paused a little sometimes, to think, to consider, perhaps even to pray? Is it all lost? . . . All lost? . . . Not enough time now? . . . Could there come, do you think, a time like that?

That, my dear friends, is the thing to fear far more than death. It is worse, far worse, than what the world calls "failure." It is what Jesus meant by his parable of the prosperous man who hastened to build bigger barns. It was not, however, the bigness of his barns that was wrong. It was the smallness of the man's soul. "This night," said God, in the story told by Jesus—"This night is thy soul required of thee!" Something the man had forgotten. "Soul? Oh yes . . . Soul . . . How many eight-inch timbers, how many four-inch? How much thatching? How many men must I employ? What must I pay them? This will be a splendid barn, the envy of the neighborhood. I'm a successful farmer! I'm looked up to . . . Soul? Yes, I was going to do something about that some day. When I got time. It will cure, no doubt, this thing that's nagging at me, making me anxious when I ought to be confident, fretting me just when

everything is going well, this thing that follows me around like a shadow—yes, just as the Rabbis say, I'll feel better about that—perhaps get rid of it altogether—when I do something about my soul. But that will be later; and meanwhile, the barn." "No," said God, "now, not later; the soul, not the barn!" As God, of course, had been saying all the man's life. The quiet, insistent whisper to which he would not listen. How can you be sure, he questioned? Later, perhaps. Later. Barns are very substantial. You know what you've built when you've built a barn. But soul—well—perhaps—sometime. So he wouldn't listen. But the whisper went on. "You are building a life—a life. And life is just the chance to grow a soul."

It's worth listening—worth listening for long enough—to what our frustrations are trying to tell us. Things not worth having. Things to give up. Things to hold on to only lightly. And things not to miss. The world—have you seen it?—the world is wonderful. The morning and evening skies. The good earth. The miracle of all creation in every blade of grass. Man's joy and sorrow. His poetry and his music. His towers, his bridges, his palaces. His great ships, his shining wings that pierce the air. His song of hope in the wilderness. His torches in the dark. Have you listened? Have you walked perchance with a little child, his hand in yours, while he pointed you to this and that: did you share with him his marvelous simplicity, his unwearying wonder, and his unspoiled joy? Have you known what it is to be a friend, to be neighbor to some one who needed you, and to find in surprise that you had given less than you received? Have you been, in heart and soul, a part of humankind?

This and more, what has thwarted you is trying to tell you. That life can be good; that we can live it well. And that the time to live is always now.

Prayer: *O God, whose witness is our heart's unrest, teach us how simple is the truth that saves us, and how near the courage in which journeys are begun. Amen.*

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